DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 103 464 TM 004 298

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TITLE Abaco: Education in an Isolated Community.
PUB DATE 1 Aug 74
NOTE 27p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.95 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Budgeting; *Cultural Isolation; Curriculum Development; Educational Administration; Educational Change; *Educational Needs; Educational Problems; Elementary Secondary Education; Expenditure Per Student; *Individualized Curriculum; Instructional Materials; Memorizing; Power Structure; *Rote Learning; Student Certification; Student Teacher Ratio; Traditional Schools
IDENTIFIERS *Abaco Islands

ABSTRACT

The people of the Abaco Islands could, but do not, have a meaningful educational system. Although there are many problems inherent in the physical distribution of students, which complicates transportation efforts and contributes to a high student-teacher ratio, the major problem stems from administrative educational policy and fund distribution. The Ministry of Education holds the power in the Abaconian educational system. This ministry perpetuates the rote learning process by emphasizing memorization rather than creative thinking processes, and it determines a rigid school curriculum which does not offer courses relevant to the Abaconian student, such as in the area of vocational training. Certification tests serve to measure student success, though few students progress to such a level. Factors contributing to low achievement are poor facilities, lack of educational materials, and inattention to student abilities and needs. Money allocated per pupil is extremely low, estimated in American dollars at $399.56 in 1970. The significance of this figure may be considered in conjunction with the probability that up to half of the educational funds go to administrative expenses. An alternative, open classroom, educational system is considered. (DEP)

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ABACO: EDUCATION IN AN ISOLATED COMMUNITY

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with

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EDUCATION & WELFARE
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1 August, 1974
NOVA UNIVERSITY
Ft. Lauderdale, Florida

TM 004 298

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PREFACE

We wish to cover three things in this preface. The first is the source of the figures and other information in this report. The bulk of the information was obtained through interviews with people on the islands of Abaco and personal observation. Some statistical information was obtained through printed material which is referenced in the text.

We wish to thank the people in Abaco that gave so freely of their time. Without their knowledge and willing cooperation, this report could not have possibly been done.

Finally we want to emphasize as strongly as we can that the kinds of schooling that are offered in the conclusion to this report can exist and do exist. The authors of this report are an educational researcher and a teacher. We know education like this can work because we have seen it work and one of us makes it work every day.

Again our thanks for the help that we have recieved. Naturally all errors of either fact or conclusion are our own.

THE EXISTING SYSTEM

THE TASK

The task of providing education to people of the islands of Abaco is not a simple one. They are spread thinly across the length of a 130 mile long island plus several outlying cays (see Table 1 and Figure 1). The small size of the communities involved means that the number of children to be served at any one location is small. This problem is complicated by the problems of transportation. The biggest problem is the extremely poor condition of the Great Abaco highway, especially at its northern end. By the same token, children from the outlying cays must be reached by water. Thus bringing together children from several communities is likely to be both difficult and expensive. With the exception of the area around Marsh Harbor which has the heaviest concentration of both population and good roads, the task of education on Abaco consists of teaching small groups of children of all ages and ability levels in relatively isolated settings.

In addition to the requirements for instruction in the traditional schools subjects, there is a need for various kinds of vocational training. The small population size as well as the isolation of the islands, make the people dependent on other local people for all services. Any improvement in the business climate will be likely to greatly augment the existing needs for skilled, technical people in many fields.

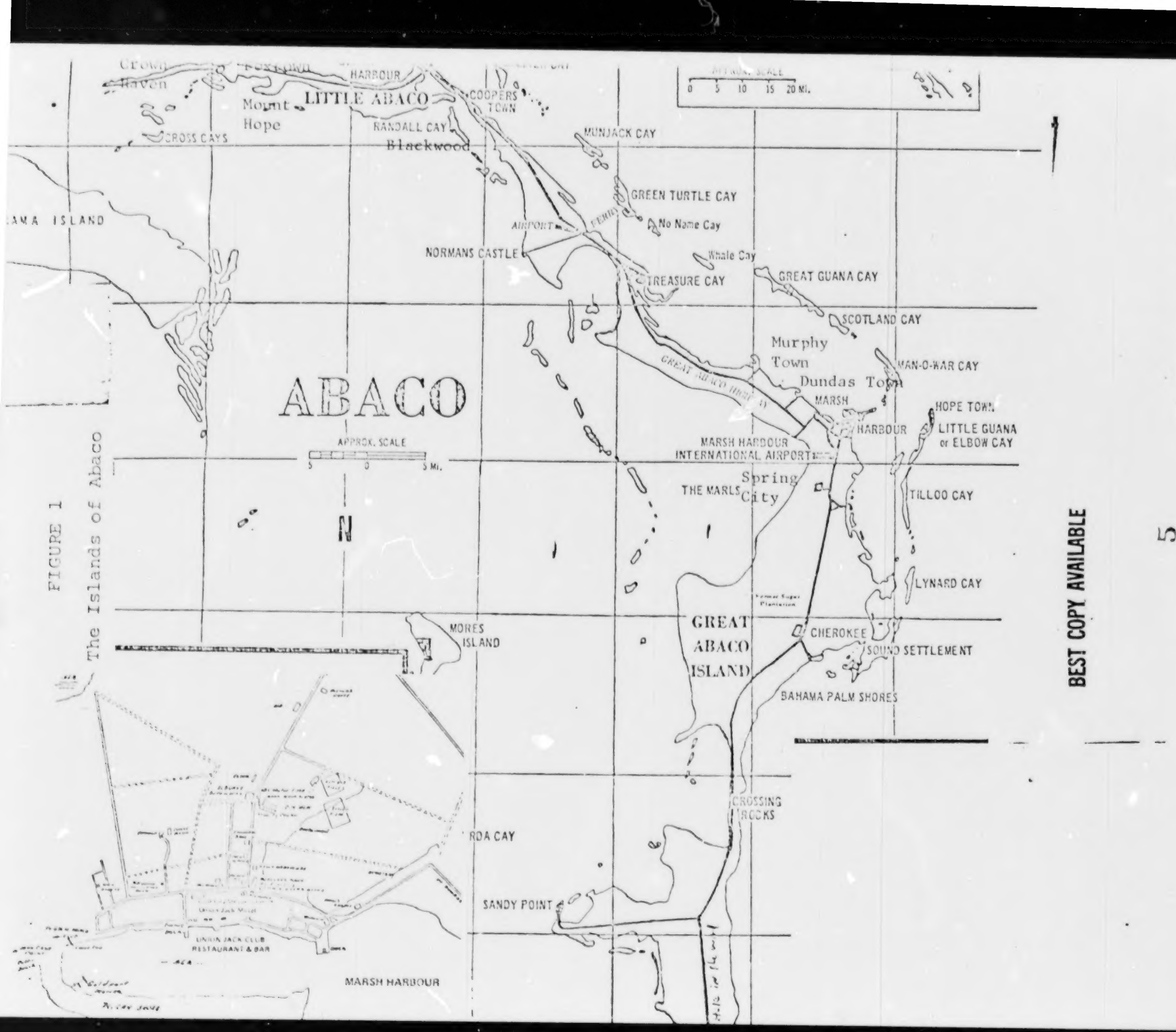

FIGURE 1 The Islands of Abaco

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THE RESPONSE

Organization- The educational system of the Bahamas and thus Abaco is organized around the English model. Specifically there are three organizational levels. The first and most important is the Ministry of Education in Nassau. The second level is the District Education Officer (DEO). The third level is the school itself.

The Ministry of Education is by far the most powerful element in the educational system. It controls the curriculum, the supplies, and staff selection. It has an important say in the location of teachers as well as in the selection of the school headmasters. Equally important in terms of its impact on instruction is the fact that the Ministry prepares the Bahama Junior Certificate (BJC) examinations. These exams, about which more will be said, are central to the whole system around which credit for school work is based.

The next level of the organization is the District Education Officer. This person has just a secretary and few substansive functions. Beyond dictating teacher assignments on Abaco and serving as an intermediary, he does little. Given ambition and interest, the DEO could play an important role in distributing resources, in advising and assisting headmasters, and in coordinating between schools. The current DEO on Abaco has not seen fit to exercise this role and so those functions are largely left undone.

The final level of organization is the school itself. Several of the schools are so small that no internal

TABLE 1

Population

Location	Population (Approx.)
Crown Haven	150
Foxtown	200
Mount Hope	50
Wood Cay	90
Cooperstown	650
Blackwood	50
Green Turtle Cay	310
Treasure Cay	200
Great Guana Cay	125
Murphy Town	400
Dundas Town	400
Man-of-War Cay	300
Marsh Harbor	900
Hope Town	400
Spring City	90
Cherokee Sound	350
Sandy Point	450
Subtotal	5,115
Other	1,385
Total	6,500

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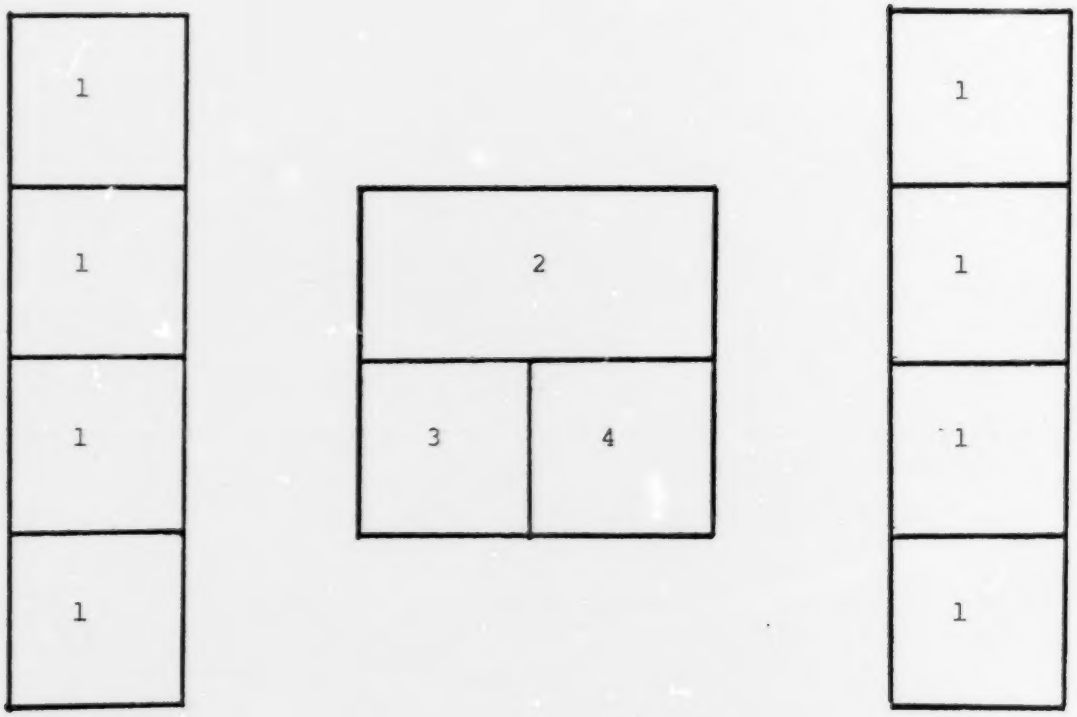
organization is required. In any case the schools have little function beyond the direct ones of instruction and discipline. Schools may request specific supplies but these requests are largely ignored as a basis for providing materials. Thus one school may have a surplus while another may be short. In one case a school had 300 drama books while lacking the basic text. Beyond this there are a number of Ministry imposed administrative requirements that must be met. For instance, teachers in all classes are required to keep detailed attendance records. The Ministry does not, however, require that this information be reported and it is never used.

In sum, the educational system revolves around the Ministry of Education. The system is designed to involve little or no initiative at the local level. In fact some teachers do go beyond these requirements, making their own materials or finding supplies for their classrooms. However, these actions are in spite of and not because of the current system.

Facilities- The facilities consist of self-contained classrooms. Most buildings are equipped with lavatories. None are heated or air-conditioned. The lack of heating can be a serious problem during cold snaps in the winter. The lay-out of the upper school in Spring City which is contained in Figure 2 is illustrative. This school has a number of facilities not found in the other public schools on the island. It has a science lab, though it is solely for teacher demonstrations as the room has neither the equipment nor the room for student work. The Spring City school also has some electric typewriters donated by the Junior Chamber of Commerce and some housekeeping materials. Two electric

FIGURE 2

Spring City High School



KEY

1- Classroom

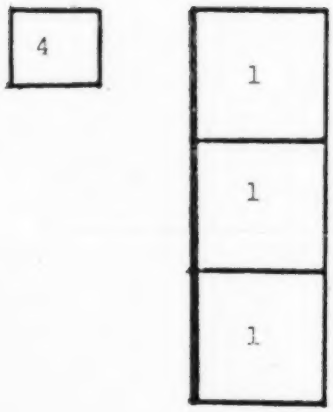
2- Toilets

3- Staff

4- Office

FIGURE 3

Cooperstown All-Age School



KEY

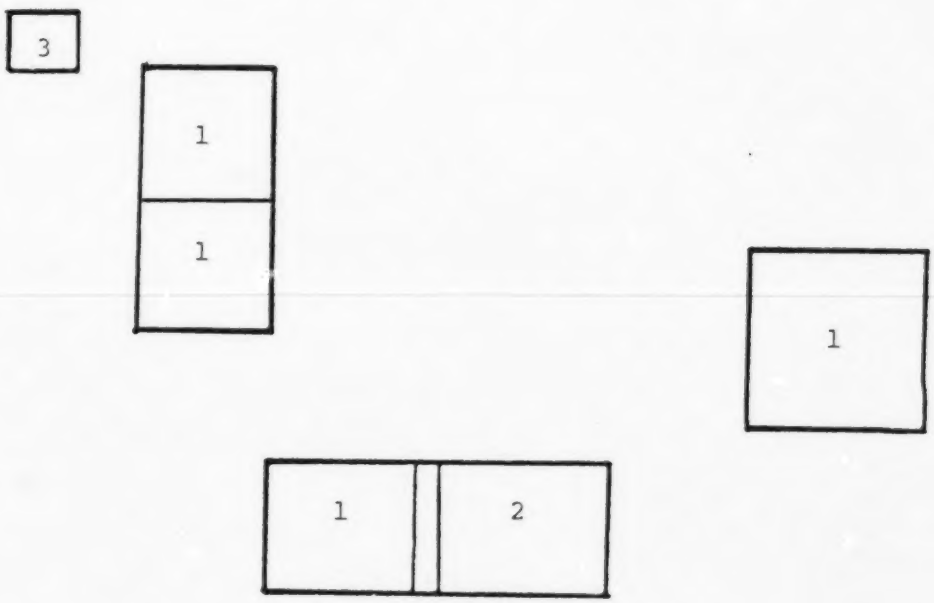
1- Classroom

2- Toilet

3- Office

4- Storage

Great Abaco Highway



stoves were sent by the Ministry; however, adequate space and hookups were and are not available. They have never been used. There is a small room for staff preparation and an office for the headmaster. This is the one school on the island that has more than a minimal number of teachers. This is a problem in that when the teachers have a free period, they do not have use of their own classroom for preparation, since they are being used by other teachers.

The layout of the all age school in Cooperstown is given in Figure 3. It has children ranging from 5-14 years of age. The total number of children is over 300. It is layed out entirely in self-contained classrooms. These rooms are overcrowded having between 30-50 children per room.

In general all schools lack enough of the basic text materials let alone having an adequate supply of library books. Specialized teaching facilities such as language laboratories are not available. Despite the efforts of the community to help where it can, the facilities are inadequate to the task of the traditional self-contained approach. Facilities for more recent approaches such as the open classroom are wholly absent.

Staff- The staff of the schools is highly variable in quality. There is theoretically no differentiation in duties or responsibilities. There is however, a wide range of salary scales based on the preparation that the teacher has had. This ranges from people who have graduated from

TABLE 2

School Statistics

Location	School Type	Students	Teachers	S/T Ratio
Foxtown	AA	200	4	50 - 1
Cooperstown	AA	300	5	60 - 1
Green Turtle Cay	AA	50	2	25 - 1
Great Guana Cay	AA	50	2	25 - 1
Dundas Town	Elem	250	6	42 - 1
Man-of-War Cay	AA	50	2	25 - 1
Marsh Harbor	Elem	75	4	18 - 1
Hope Town	AA	50	2	25 - 1
Spring City	HS	200	13	18 - 1
Cherokee Sound	AA	50	2	25 - 1
Crossing Rocks	AA	100	2	50 - 1
Sandy Point	AA	300	4	75 - 1
Private				
Treasure Cay	AA	20	2	10 - 1
St. Francis	AA	100	6	16 - 1
Baptist	AA	80	5	16 - 1

All figures are estimates.

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four year institutions in the United States, Canada or England down to people who have not yet finished the Bahamian equivalent of a high school education. In addition to the uneven prior preparation, there is a wildly variable ratio of teachers to pupils (see Table 2). The high school is relatively fortunate while the outlying communities are inadequately staffed by any standards. This inadequacy is compounded by the fact that the better trained and more experienced teachers prefer working in the Marsh Harbor area which is to say in the high school. The teachers preference for the Marsh Harbor area can be explained in terms of the facilities and the fact that the outlying communities lack many of the amenities of Marsh Harbor. It does not explain why the Ministry and the DEO permit the situation to remain.

Beyond the teaching staff there are only the headmasters. There are no secretaries, counselors, psychologists or aides. The goverment nurse does visit the schools to provide some health services. Of the headmasters, all are Bahamian. None are, however, Abaconian. In order to satisfy the Bahamianization program of the Nassau government, Bahamian male teachers are promoted to headmaster practically as fast as they can be graduated from the Bahamian Teachers College. This practice makes for a fairly high turnover in the teaching staff.

Curriculum and Instruction- As mentioned before, the curriculum is dictated by the Ministry of Education. The

FIGURE 4

School Curriculum

Religious Knowledge

Mathematics

English

English Literature

Health

Geography

History

Art

Physical Education

General Science

Bookkeeping

Typing

Spanish

Woodworking

Needlework

subjects are listed in Figure 4. There is little or no flexibility in the student's choice of subject, and there are virtually no electives. As can be seen by inspecting Figure 4, this curriculum is highly traditional and has bent very little in the direction of the vocational or other needs of the students.

Instruction is geared around the process of rote memorization. This practice has a number of factors that support its continued use. The first is that it is the educational method taught at the Teacher's College in Nassau. The teachers from that school use the notes that they have accumulated there as the basis of their teaching practices. Another factor that supports its use is the large size of some of the classes in the outlying schools. Its use allows one teacher to control, if not teach, large numbers of children at the same time. The most important factor, however, is the fact that it is the policy of the Ministry of Education.

The instructional process is geared to two sets of examinations. The first is the Bahama Junior Certificate (BJC) examination. These examinations are given in every academic subject. Passing of five of these exams is the requirement for entry into the Teacher's College. These tests are aimed at about the U.S. equivalent to the 9th grade. (Comparison with the U.S. system is highly inexact since there are no real equivalent processes.) The second examination is the General Certificate Examination (GCE). Passage of 5 of these examinations is the prerequisite for

entry into University level work. It is also desireable that a person receiving a Teacher's Certificate obtain this level, but it is not required. The GCE level exams are largely irrelevant to education on the islands of Abaco since few students reach that level. However, both of these examinations shape instruction in very important ways since they are the determinants of success.

Bahama Junior Certificate Examinations- The BJC exams are by far the most important ones in terms of education on the islands of Abaco since they are required for entrance to the Teacher's College and since few students get past this level. The BJC's are given in the early summer with results announced anywhere from September to January. (Late announcement frequently occurs and disrupt class scheduling since it is unknown whether a particular student passed a particular test or not.) The BJC exams are prepared by the Ministry of Education in Nassau. They are oriented to the recall of factual information rather than toward any application of that information. Although the passing grades on these tests are as low as 40% correct, the percentage of students failing ranges from 30% in religion and health up to 100% in subjects such as English Literature.

There are a number of criticisms of the BJC exams that can be made. The health test given in 1974, for instance, had one section containing questions with a set of pictures from which the student was to select the correct answer. Out of 10 questions, 4 had the wrong set of responses. Thus for those questions there were no right answers. The grading

of these exams also poses problems. In one recent instance, there was no one available at the Ministry of Education to grade an English Literature test who had actually read the books from which the test items were drawn.

Finances- Table 3 gives figures concerning the expenditure per pupil in the Bahamas as a whole over the last 15 years. Current figures are not available; however, a figure of between $300 and $350 per pupil per year is not unreasonable. Of this total 1965 government figures indicate that at least 15% is spent for overhead items off the islands of Abaco. It is probable that this figure is much higher and may run up to 50%. If the figure of 1875 students is accepted as accurate, a per pupil expenditure o $300 would result in total expenditures of $562,500. Of this amount anywhere from $84,375 to $281,250 is currently being consumed by administrative and other expenditures off island.

TABLE 3

Expenditures Per Pupil

Year	Number of Students	Expenditures	
		Total	Per Pupil
1970	38,333	15,316,317	399.56
1965	22,096	5,443,200	246.34
1959	16,763	1,764,876	105.28

Expenditures are in U.S. dollars. Figures derived from The Statesman's Yearbook: 1972-1973, World Survey of Education IV: Higher Education, and World Survey of Education V: Education Policy, Legilslation, and Administration.

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CONCLUSION

An Alternative- This report has been focused, necessarily, on problems, but education can be a source of pride and optimism. It is on the potentials of education that the focus of interest should always return to in the end. So the conclusion of this report is a sketch of what school can be, and how to get there.

A Day in the Classroom- The development of every child as a whole is the single most important function of education. This development involves the child's mental and physical capacities. The goal is a happy child, capable of independent thought, confident in his ability to understand the world and himself, and with the self-discipline to achieve his goals.

In a traditional classroom, all of the children enter and sit in their assigned desks, facing the teacher. Usually conversation is discouraged or forbidden. The first half hour is occupied with the teacher taking attendance and lunch count, doing the pledge, making announcements, etc. The lessons begin with all children reading the same reading book although their reading levels probably span more than six levels. Obviously some children are completely lost and others bored. Sometimes reading groups are used. Even within these, children can be on many levels since each child progresses differently. Reading lasts about seventy-five minutes.

After reading math is usually taught. Generally reading

is the only subject that is grouped. Therefore math, writing, language and social studies are taught as if all children understand and learn on the same level at the same time. During the math lesson, which continues for an hour, the children are again immobile and mainly silent. This means they have been sitting for two and one-half hours. Even adults get restless in this amount of time. With math finished, the children finally get to move and are taken to the restrooms, outside and then to lunch.

After lunch the same routine is followed. All are taught the same writing lesson. In language and social studies the textbooks are again on the same reading level, and many children are unable to read them. Books are generally the only type of learning material available, preventing children who could learn through their other senses from learning. This lack of variety causes boredom in the brighter students. So children continue to sit and listen to the teacher grasping what they can, loosing the rest.

The conventional day hardly sounds exciting or challenging. But this is not the worst aspect. Since everything is planned by the teacher for the children, decision making, independent thought, individual progress, curiosity, questioning and self-discipline are seldom encouraged; let alone learned. Yet these are the very qualities that a person must cultivate if he is going to be responsible for his life.

As compared to the traditional classroom, in an open classroom children enter the room, sit where they please, converse with their peers or immediately begin to work on their own. Children are responsible for the opening exercises, lunch count, attendance, etc. Lessons, as they are known in the traditional classroom, do not exist here. In this classroom children contract with the teacher for their work on a weekly basis. This contract means that the individual child helps to decide what he wants to learn with the guidance of a teacher. Each day the child gets his contract and continues work. His program is on his level and he can proceed at his own pace, knowing that a teacher will be available when he decides that he needs help. He discovers on his own using many types of materials that involve all of his senses. He relies on himself to know when to use the restroom, eat or go outdoors. He is constantly making his own decisions, growing independent and developing self-esteem.

The teacher is still important and very necessary because she must know when to guide, when to introduce a new concept, when to "push" a child or "slow" a child down, when to encourage and when to leave alone. Her most important tools are her powers of observation. For through these she can know when a child is ready to advance to the next stage in his learning process.

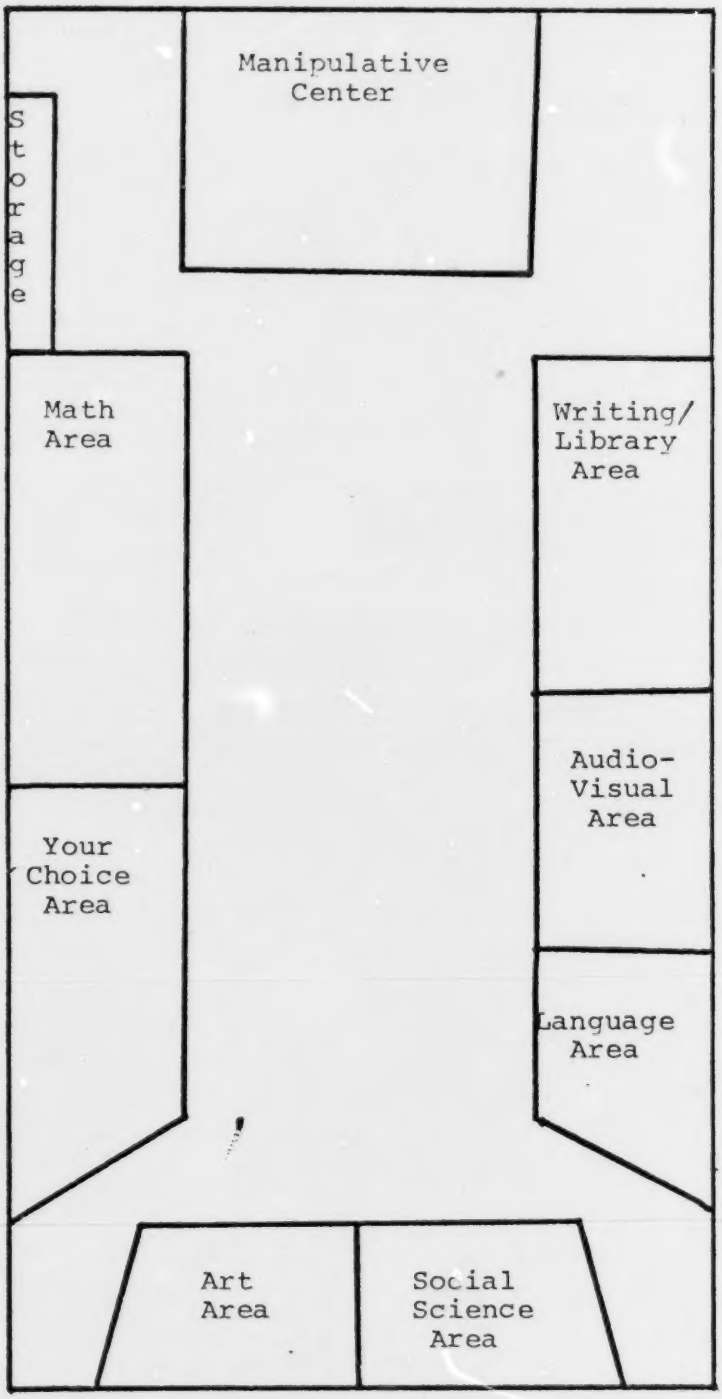
To summarize, a traditional classroom is teacher oriented. The teacher plans, rules, and dictates all learning. Few children have the chance to succeed. An open classroom is student oriented. The teacher is there as an observer, guide

and helper. The children plan, question, wonder and grow.

The open classroom is best obtained through the use of learning centers. Figure 5 presents a diagram of an open class room with learning centers for the early primary grades. This is only an example and the centers can be varied to fit any situation. These learning centers are areas created for different subjects so children can operate individually or in small groups. The number of centers is not as important as the materials contained within them, but there must be enough so there is room for everyone. The following centers are the most necessary for primary levels. A writing/library center contains different items utilized to teach children beginning manuscript through creative writing on a non-graded level. The reading books are also on various reading levels. In the video-audio center the main purpose is to enable the child to learn through a multi-media approach. All subject matter can become stimulating to the child through the use of this various equipment. Included in the language center are items designated to expand the child's vocabulary and use of his language. The social science center incorporates material which will allow the child to become more familiar with his world. In the art center there are multiple objects to provide the child with the opportunity to use his imagination and to develop talent in this area. The math center is equipped with math concepts on all levels. The manipulative center contains many devices to help the child develop large and fine motor skills as well as

FIGURE 5

Open Classroom



Scale 1 inch = 5 feet

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visual and tactile skills.

To insure a workable system in the centers certain rules of conduct must be discussed and enforced. First the child must put whatever he is working with back in its proper place. Second no child may interfere with another's work, but must wait his turn for the material.

The material in the centers can vary widely, but it must meet certain criteria. The material to be used must have a multi- approach (different ways to learn the same concept), be non-graded, and have self-corrective features. The type of material that most frequently meets these requirements is Montessori based. The Montessori materials are typically durable, attractive, require little explanation,and usually involve a multi-sensory approach. The multi-sensory approach enables the child to absorb the idea by more than one way, thus understanding and remembering it. Being durable the material can be reused whenever another child has reached this level relieving the teacher of having to constantly remake the same lesson. This durability also allows the child to return to the material and review what he had learned. Montessori materials are easily explained so once a child has grasped its meaning, he can teach his peers by giving them lessons. This reinforces his own knowledge and builds self-esteem. Another plus for Montessori material is its ability to be adapted to suit the needs at hand.

While the children are given greater freedom, control of the classroom is not left to chance. Many children in school

need control and motivation. One method that works well is the system presented by Harrison (1973). A classroom should portray a more true-to-life atmosphere where children can learn how to operate outside of the classroom. To establish this environment, Harrison suggests that today's economic system be used as a guide. Children are familiar with things earned with wages from jobs because they have observed their parents and society. Children are usually aware of at least some of the consequences that result when laws are broken. From here the discussion can develop this knowledge into rules for the classroom.

The primary ideas to discuss are what jobs have to be done daily or weekly, what rules must be enforced, and what the children want as rewards. These decisions can be recorded on charts that are displayed in the class area for easy reference. One chart should list all the jobs and the salaries for each. On a second chart all the rules and the fines for breaking them are listed. The third chart lists all the items that can be purchased. This last chart should be changed fairly often so the children do not become bored and hoard their money.

This system is incorporated into the normal routine of the school day. Academic work that is accomplished should be paid for immediately. The means that the teacher should keep money available at all times. This has the advantage that the child soon learns to care for his money. As the system develops there will be many ideas that can be used in one classroom but not another. Each teacher can adjust it

to her situation and children.

When this motivational system is implemented, all the benefits are not apparent at first but many soon appear. Children learn to count and add to high numbers because all money must be counted before turning it into the banker to be recorded. They learn what different denominations of bills are printed and how to exchange bills (two fives for a ten, etc.). They also become responsible for completing their jobs since they have selected them and will be paid for finishing them. They learn self-discipline by judging what to spend and how to earn. Another favorable response is the improvement of the overall discipline in the class. Since all broken rules involve fines, children soon decide not to waste their money. If they are fined once, they seldom break the rule a second time.

It Works- The most important thing to realize is that such a system is not a dream or a hope but a working reality. Such classes exist today. They can exist tomorrow on the islands of Abaco. The schools of Abaco can be a source not of concern but of pride and hope. They can be the schools of tomorrow not of yesterday. The people of Abaco must decide.

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